

Interviewer: David Frederiksen

Interviewee: Mike Bell

Date of Interview: 2006

Location: Unknown

Transcriber: Samuel Jason Trammell

Transcription Date: July 26, 2024

Pender County Oral History Project

Mike Bell: A History in the Voice of its People

Mr. Bell discusses the history of North Carolina's prison system. Throughout the interview, he explores the different trends within the prison system, and how the prison system has evolved over the years. He also shares stories about different events that occurred within Pender County, including a story about a prison escaping the Pender Correctional Facility and the man haunt that occurred after the escape.

Topics discussed include drug use and prison in North Carolina, history and operations of North Carolina prisons, prisons and technology, inmate classification, gang violence, and personal stories about Mr. Bell's experiences working the Pender County prison.

*Interviews were conducted as research for the book Pender County, a History in the Voice of its People.

David Frederiksen: Testing, testing, 123—ABCDEFGHIJKLMNPQRST, testing testing 123—We're on death and that's where most people are gonna get wound up. Testing 123, Testing 123

[00:01:18]

Mike Bell: North Carolina's Prison system is known throughout the nation and particularly in the southeast as being a very progressive system. We have a lot of programs to provide inmate with the opportunity to improve their lives. What leads people to prison in North Carolina, in any state, is it's a multi-factor kind of approach. You know, you maybe talking poverty, you maybe talking lack of vocation educational skills, you're certainly talking a lot of substance abuse. You know, I heard on the news this morning, they had the largest drug bust in Pender County History today. Half a million dollars' worth of cocaine.

[00:02:12]

Frederiksen: Really—[unclear]—Pender County

[00:02:17]

Bell: Yeah, three Hispanic guys. One from—two from Magnolia, one from Rose Hill. I don't know any details, but it was—two of them were illegal aliens from Mexico. One of them had gang tattoos, you know, the Hispanic gangs are known for drug trafficking, of course, with a large percentage—large percentage. In fact, Duplin County, which is the next county over, was in the news recently about the large percentage of Hispanic population. We're seeing a much larger number of Hispanics in our prison population, because of [unclear], we've seen a lot of Hispanics. But anyway, the North Carolina system is known as being progressive. We have a lot of opportunities for inmates to change their behavior. We have a long history—as I told you the last time, we talked our central prison in Raleigh was built back in the 1880s, as a condition for North Carolina re-entering the Union after the Civil War. I think the federal government required that all

the southern states, as a condition for getting back into the Union, had to build a central prison [in four cities?]. Typically, the central prison is in your—is in your capital city. Of course, ours is in Raleigh.

We have a unique system in North Carolina in that we have seventy-seven prisons, most states have much few prisons, but their Mega prisons. You know, their prisons have had thousands of inmates. There are some prisons that have as many as five thousand big prisons. Back in the early days of our correctional system, each county had what they called a county farm. And the highway department and the prison department were sort of merged, because the emphasis back in those days was roads, working roads. That is why whenever you travel across North Carolina, and you see prisons, you will typically see a department of transportation facility right next door. And that's the way it is here in Pender County. This prison was built back in—the original prison here was built back in the thirties. A lot of these prisons were built during that same period of time, and like I said again, as you travel around the state, you will see the same architecture. In those original prisons that were built back in the old WPA days, during the Roosevelt administration. I can't remember exactly what WPA stood for, but something public administration, public works administration.

[00:05:19]

Frederiksen: Yes, something works—puts people to work essentially during—I mean, I know the Tennessee Valley story and other social programs to bring people to work

[00:05:29]

Bell: And they used to—they used to have trucks that would pull the—they literally had chain gangs, and they would have these cages on trailers that they would hook behind the DOT [?] trucks and they would pull the trailers out into wherever the worksite was. Typically, they were benches with, you know, with chains in the floor, chains in the floor or hooks in the floor where they could hook the shackles. And they had, they were not enclosed. They had tarps that would roll down on the sides of the trailers. Not too long ago—too many years ago, somewhere up in the Raleigh area, somewhere near the Angus barn, they were clearing out a piece of land behind that restaurant and they found two of these old trailers that had been sitting out there forever. There were talks of restoring them to their original condition, kind of a neat piece of history. But this prison here was one of those road camps; originally, of course, over the years many of those have been closed down. As we modernized and built newer prisons, of course, those old structures lost a lot of their usefulness. So, ours was converted into a sowing factory, our old original prison was converted into a sowing factory.

When this prison expanded back in the early nineties, this prison here went up until the early nineties, and we only held about a hundred and thirty-some-odd inmates in that single dormitory structure. When we expanded into the seven sixty-eight, that we have here, we converted that old prison into a part of a sowing factory to build those inmates working what we called correctional enterprise, prison industry. They basically make uniforms for use within the system. Now occasionally, we will get contracts to build uniforms for other agencies for example, we do uniforms for the North Carolina ferry divisions, we make ferry uniforms for the ferry business. We have had contracts building prisoner uniforms for other states, because we can do it much cheaper than they can. Inmates are very, very small, in send what we call, sending wage? That's typically forty cents, seventy cents, or a dollar a day. Inmates who work in the factories can earn production

incentives—are a little bit higher than that, based on their output, their production. We believe in work ethic, we believe inmates working, able bodied inmates working. So, in addition to things like prison industry, prison enterprise, we also have road squads. We have minimum custody squads that are known as community work squads. They work under the supervision of an unarmed officer, because they are in minimum custody. Inmates in medium custody, such as the prison here in Pender, work under armed supervision. Because they are all convicted felons, we can use whatever force is necessary, up to and including deadly force to stop a fleeing felon, because our number one priority is public safety. In order to maintain public safety, not only do we have to keep the inmate in control, we have to prevent his escape, because of what he may do to harm the public while escaping.

So, we're authorized by law to use deadly force to stop a fleeing felon. Fortunately, that is a very, very rare occurrence. There are—there have been cases in recent years, where inmates would attempt to flee and actually get killed, trying to flee. The last one in this area, that I remember, was a few years ago over in Columbus County, next door, near somewhere down near Lake Waccamaw [?] Inmate was working on a medium custody road squad out of the prison, out of Whiteville, and he tried to run and he was shot and killed. So used to be that, we had as many as hundred prisons in North Carolina because we had a hundred counties, but over the years, many of those have been closed down. Very, very, small—very, very few of these small field units still remain, because they are less cost effective. The smaller the prison, the more it costs typically, so we've tried economize by building larger institutions which makes it—makes it cheaper.

[00:10:59]

Frederiksen: The architecture, Mr. Bell, that you said the farm [?]—was the original institution, can you describe that a little bit? Because I know it was unique, I think there's a picture up here—[unclear]—curious—

[00:11:13]

Bell: Yeah, it's—This is the original golden door, and you can see the design on the [unclear]. This is the prison in Duplin County, which is just north of here, there's the original door. You can see the architecture is almost identical.

[00:11:33]

Interview: There is a barn—

[00:11:37]

Bell: There's a long rectangular building, and typically what it was, was that you would have a little small area in the center where the correctional officer—guard as they were called back in the early days, prison guard—we have gotten away from that term, you know, and we gotten so that we were—very sensitive. In fact, when the newspaper or the news media refer to us as prison guards we were offended, because we are now correctional officers, which is a much more professional connotation than a prison guard. But anyway, those typical—those old prisons would typically have two large dormitories, one on each side, and in the center area they would be a caged in area where the officer would—that would be his patrol. And the dorms were opened bays, in this particular dorm, which was typical in many of them, would house about sixty-five to seventy on each side. So, they were large open bay areas.

A lot of people have a misconception that all prisons are single cell, and very, very few prisons are single cell. Most of the prisons are dormitory style, where you have as many as sixty to seventy inmates living in the same area. So just like—like a military barracks, bunk beds lined up—as I told you, the emphasis in the early days was working the highways. There was also a lot of farms. We still have some large farm operations in our system; the Odom Cow Dome [?] complex, which is up near the Virginia line, it's about five thousand acres, and they grow a lot of produce. This prison in the early days had a hog operation, where the inmates would tend hog houses and we would raise hogs. In the earlier, those hogs were used within the system, as the years passed, those hogs were sold on open market. But those—those—I don't think we have any or very little livestock operations going anywhere anymore.

[00:14:13]

Frederiksen: Sure, I guess, you know, the agricultural industry in America has shrunk down perhaps the need or demand for that.

[00:14:21]

Bell: We have our own cannery up at the same—at the same place, the Odom Catalon complex, where inmates actually tend the farm, grow the various crops. It's kind of curious, those two prisons join one another, and they're divided by a river. We've had cases, in the years past, of inmates who would escape one prison, and tempt to swim the river. Only to come up inside another prison. The officers there would actually supervise the inmates on horseback. They ride horses out of the—because it's huge, huge farm operation. But those days, are you know, for all practical purposes are gone. It's becoming less and less and less. We've gotten pretty high tech, we've got print plants, we've got metal fabrication, of course, you know, the stereotypical the inmates build the license plates. They still do. I think they've moved that operation from the central prison, where it used to be, over to the women's prisons. They build—they make the road signs that you see, inmates make those, we have paint plant, where we make paint—we produced—we have an optical plant, there's a lot of industry within the prison system.

[00:15:47]

Frederiksen: System has gone hijacked. You know what I mean? [unclear]

[00:15:51]

Bell: It used to be, that many of your prisons were—the perimeter security was an armed officer standing in a tower. Those days are lessening, now the prisons that are being built have electronic intrusion systems. Microwave systems, taunt wire system—there's some high-tech stuff in terms of perimeter security, when you have those kinds of systems, just like in an institution this large here in Pender County, to provide adequate security for a prison like this in Pender County, with the use of towers you probably have to have six or seven. But with this—what we call EIS system, you can supervise the perimeter or guard the perimeter with one or two roving patrol vehicles, who have electronic sensors—panels in their vehicles that will alert them if there is a disturbance in a particular section of fence. We can supervise this large perimeter with one or two depending on time of day. Once we go into a lockdown mode, meaning the yards are close. Inmates are confined to the dormitory buildings, then we can drop back to the one. But most of the time, we maintain two, because it is a pretty large perimeter. They can respond, in a vehicle, immediately to any disturbance within a particular zone.

So, prisons are becoming very, very high tech. They really are. Compared to the old day—I remember when I first started, a lot of these old-style prisons had a coal burning stove, you know, a little pot-bellied stove. Some of the prison—most of them, were cold, and you burn coal. That's how they would heat—there was no, there was no central heat, there was no central air. That's another misconception that a lot of people have about prisons, particularly the more modern prisons, is that people think that these dormitories are air conditioned. They are not. Now some prisons, by the nature of their design and the level of their security, are air conditioned. Because they don't want inmates to be able to open windows. But most of the prisons in North Carolina are not air conditioned, and so you have to rely on a ventilation system. Pedestal fans or wall mounted fans to keep those dorms reasonably—I have—I've been in prison dorms, in fact that, that prison in that picture is in Wayne County. That prison—that building there was built back in the forties, and I have seen temperatures in those dormitories that prison ninety degrees at one or two o'clock in the morning. Well, there's very little insulation, so the brick would heat up during the daytime and would maintain the heat. And so a lot of misconceptions about prisons and the conditions in prisons.

We are proud of a system in North Carolina where we can maintain a humane, constitutionally defensible system. We provide inmates with—we meet their needs as it relates to mental health intervention, medical intervention. We have a lot of programs that try to address some of their deficiencies, whether it be educationally, vocationally, substance abuse, alcohol abuse, those kinds of things. So, most prisons have a pretty complex program system where they can offer these things. It's like the old axiom about leading the horse to water, you can't make it drink. So, you have some inmates who chose not to participate in some of those programs that will hopefully return them to the community a better person than we received them, provide them some skills that will hopefully keep them out of the system. Being convicted of a felony, of course, puts that black mark on your record. Some people will not hire you because of it, some jobs are cut off to you because of it. So we try to address those needs, and try to return the inmate, a better person more capable of adjusting. We have things like anger management, stress management, ethical fitness, English as a second language, ABEGD, a lot of inmates come to prison without much formal education as far as having completed high school. So, we try to address that.

[00:21:16]

Frederiksen: So, what has been the evolution, Mr. Bell? From the farm, to increasingly more modern facility, to all the programming now that you have?

[00:21:27]

Bell: Well, you know—

[00:21:30]

Frederiksen: A correctional officer point view?

[00:21:31]

Bell: There's a whole lot of philosophies out there. You know, a lot of people—you know—when you think about prisons—you the public, donkey public, when they're concerned about where their tax dollars go, they want good highways, they want good schools, they want good hospitals, but typically, prison is not, you know—a lot of people have the mentality is that, let's lock them up,

protect us. Lock these antisocial—these criminal behaviors—lock them up, but what they fail to realize is ninety eight percent of these people in prisons are coming back to the community one day. Now, simply locking a person up, warehousing them without addressing those deficiencies that they have is not doing anybody any justice. Because what typically happens is that a person returns to the community, only to commit additional crime. Because we don't really have—we won't equip them in any way. So, the evolution is—has gotten away from the—you seen the old pictures of the strip uniforms and the chained gangs, ball and chains. It weren't too many years ago that we had things like corporal punishment here, we had the whipping posts and that sort of thing in prisons. I use the analogy of, if you got a dog, and you pin that dog up and you mistreat that dog, or neglect that dog, or abuse that dog. What do you got?

[00:23:30]

Frederiksen: A mean angry dog.

[00:23:32]

Bell: You got a mean angry dog. Human beings are not different. We have to maintain—we're not coddling prisoners, but we have realized that we must address those things if we're going to have any degree of success. You know, recidivism rates are high, the latest figures that I've heard about North Carolina is somewhere in the forties forty percent. The way that measured is that, in the next three years of all the people that we released from prison this year, forty something percent of them will recidivate—they will commit additional crime. Other jurisdictions have higher recidivism rates in North Carolina, over fifty percent in some places. So, the philosophies have changed, in that we're getting away from the rock pile, the chain gang, you know, the manual, the hard labor. We're getting away from those philosophies—even though we do believe in the value of work, we do believe in the work ethic. If you don't have a good work ethic, regardless of your education level, your skill level, you're not going to maintain steady employment. So, we believe in hard work, we believe in engaging inmates in productive activities, but we've also realized that we have to address those other things too. That's why over the years, for example, our drug and alcohol initiatives have expanded leaps and bounds across the states. Because we—the statistics tell us that about seventy five percent of the people get, drugs or alcohol were either directly or indirectly related to them doing what they did.

[00:25:27]

Frederiksen: Yeah, the statistics say those that retreat to drug and alcohol are really self-medicating from mental health issues.

[00:25:36]

Bell: We see a large percentage of people come into prison in North Carolina for—as habitual DWI offenders. We realized we got—if we're gonna make a difference, we got to address those things. Therefore the—we—back in 1980 about 88 or 89, the North Carolina legislature enacted legislation that created what we call the dark program, drug alcohol recovery treatment. The first program was at Wayne County where I was before. Since then, it has expanded across the state. Pender County now has a one hundred eight—one hundred four bed—drug—drug and alcohol treatment program under this dark program. It started out as a traditional twenty-eight-day program, now, it's expanded into a ninety-day program. AA and NA—hadn't been too many years ago that many prisons did not have an AA program or a NA program, now a majority do. We

recognize the value of NA. Pender County is very fortunate in that we have a large cadre of community volunteers from this community that come into these—our prison every week, to help us with various programs. Most of them are religious volunteers, because we also realize the value of spirituality and belief in a higher being in helping people's rehabilitation. We have a lot of volunteers that come in, but we also have volunteers that come in with AAA and NA. We have volunteers that come in and we've actually got program through one of the local—to the local methodist church where they come in—two volunteers come in and help the inmates—teach the inmates how to play guitar. Good program. It engages their time, it's something positive and constructive. That's one of the keys, also we find is that idleness, the old cliché, is the devil's workshop. We want inmates engaged as much as we can get them engaged, day and night. So we have a lot of evening programs. A lot of programs. We have an arts and crafts program, we have in addition to all the formal programs that are offered to us through the local community college, we have a lot of volunteer programs.

[00:28:25]

Frederiksen: What would say about—a rural area like this and how kind of the criminal element works? I think that a lot of people they, you know, expect drug and narcotics and criminal behavior to be the stuff they see in a city.

[00:28:42]

Bell: But that's changing—

[00:28:45]

Frederiksen: Well, what is that shape? And then what is your kind of perception as, as the supervisor here on site? What are your observations been? Just about that?

[00:28:54]

Bell: Well, it's changing. We're seeing much more and more—you know, hadn't been too many years ago that people didn't lock their doors. They didn't worry about leaving their keys in their chair, but we're seeing more and more crime in rural areas. Traditionally we used to think of crime as an urban problem. But it's just—that drug bust yesterday just illustrates what I'm talking about; sometimes criminals move out into those remote areas so that they can operate without too much scrutiny. They can be remote, they can get out there in the middle of nowhere, but it's changing. A lot of our inmates do come from urban areas. They come from the Charlotte's and the Greensboro, and the Raleigh's and the Durhams, and the Fayetteville and the Winston Salems, and the Wilmington. Of course—a large of state as North Carolina is—it's kind of curious, a lot of prisons that are built are in built in rural areas. Prisons are big business in some of these low wealth counties because it brings a lot of jobs, prisons spend a lot of money locally, so a lot of these counties like to see these prisons in the area. Of course, that some—in many cases that isolate the inmate to a certain extent from his home area or his family.

[00:30:34]

Frederiksen: Which may be a supportive element.

[00:30:36]

Bell: We encourage visitation, we encourage—but we have inmates here from the western part of the state. A lot of the prison structure—seems like more of its [occurred?] down east. We're getting ready—we broke ground with a new prison in Columbus County. We just dedicated another prison in Greene County, up near Snow Hill, which is a very rural farm economy county—low wealth county. But the county commissioners there wanted. We wanted it—there was already two big prisons in that county. But they said, "we'll give you the land, you can build another one." Bertie County is getting ready to open up a thousand bed prison; Bertie County is another one of those low wealth, low population, rural areas. So, we see a lot of inmates from urban areas that are sent way down here, and some of the families just can't come see them, or if they can, it's very sporadic and not so often. But we believe in family support, because, like I said those inmates are going back and that family support is going to be important to their rehabilitation and their ability to stay in the community when they get back.

Every prison has visitation. Some of them do it just on weekends, some of it—we do it here by appointment. Inmates' family members have to make an appointment to come see them. We allow one or two hours a week, depending on what day they are visiting. We recently had a unique program here a few weeks ago, offered by a prison ministry out of Taylorsville, called forgiving ministries. It was a program designed specifically for inmates and their children. Children of inmates are often the hidden victims of crimes. You know, the inmates commit a crime and of course, when he does there is an obvious victim. Whether it be a robbery or rape or an robbery or whatever it is. A lot of people don't think about the victims in their children, the inmate's children who suffer. So, this program was kind of, like I said, kind of unique. The inmate's children were—we handpicked the inmates, the inmates had to make an application. But they came down here and we spent a whole day talking to this group of inmates about parenting and relationships. Then on Saturday their children came and spent the whole day with their dad. Some of these kids had not seen their father in ten, eight, ten years. It was very, very touching, and very successful—it was a big success. Reestablishing those relationships is very important.

[00:33:37]

Frederiksen: What kind of personal histories have you been here Mr. Bell? You've been in this business how long sir?

[00:33:41]

Bell: I started in early 1973, so I'm in—I'm getting ready to start my thirty third year. Actually, the thirty fourth year, I came here in 1998 from Wayne County. I was superintendent in Wayne County for about eight years, and I've been here about eight years.

[00:34:00]

Frederiksen: Are there any stories about this institutions that are kind of curious, peculiar? One and then two, if you feel comfortable with maybe a story of a prisoner who's at this institution or recovery or some kind of unique? [unclear—].

[00:34:22]

Bell: Well, nothing really jump out at me as unique. That people who work here that had been here, I mean, been at the same institution for twenty-five years. I mean, they were here when this place was just like a little small field here. I don't—nothing comes to mind. We've had a lot of

inmates here who—we've had a few inmates here who had been on death row, and their death sentence was overturned by the court, and they were sentenced to life. We have inmates here who have been sentenced to as much as a one hundred and twenty years, and under the law, they will never get out of prison. They will die—die in prison because of the length of their sentence. You see a wide disparity sometimes. Inmates may have committed similar crimes in different jurisdictions, under different judges, and you may see a wide disparity between the penalties. Now, the new structured sentencing law has changed that to a great extent, because now there's a matrix and based on the category of the ABCD of the felony, and then there's across the top you have inmates or defendants that are assessed points based on their history. You assess the points, you look at the class of the offense, you come down to a square and then the judge has ranges, that he has to stay within to sentence someone. More continuity.

It also has involved parole, that new structure sentence has involved parole. So, the inmate now has a minimum and maximum, the maximum is usually about twenty-five percent higher than the minimum. For example, he may be sentenced from a hundred months to a hundred and twenty months or a hundred and twenty-five months, nothing is going to get that prisoner out any earlier than his minimum sentence. There's no parole. So, he will pull at least the minimum and based on his behaviors, he may pull up to the maximum. We have a long list of rules and regulations that inmates must follow, and for violating those rules and regulations there are certain sanctions. Segregation time, loss of earn times, loss of privileges, administrative fees, there's a whole list of sanctions based on the category of offenses. We are fortunate here in this prison, in that, we have no experienced the degree of violence that a lot of other prisons that are similar to this half. There are problems in prison in North Carolina with increasing levels of violence, not only inmate on inmate violence, but also inmate on staff violences. Staff assaults have gone up, inmate on inmate assaults had gone up. Part of the reason for that is we are experiencing a gang phenomenon in North Carolina that we have not really seen before.

Compared to places like California, Texas, New York and New Jersey and Illinois, some of those large where you have the Bloods and the Crips and the Latin Kings and the MS13. But as our gang problem has grown, we have seen a need to address that before it becomes a major problem. One of the ways we've done that is we created what we call a gang unit. We have a specially designated prison, where inmates get validated, we have a validation process. That includes paraphernalia that we may catch them with, tattoos—tattoos are a big, you know, gang thing. MS13 which is a Hispanic gang—Anyway, once the inmate is validated, and if he's validated at a certain level, he could be sent to this gang unit where there is a special behavior modification program that put in place, to try to get him to denounce his affiliation, and membership in these gangs. As we see more and more Hispanic inmates in our system, then those Hispanic gangs are becoming more and more prominent. Some of them are very violent. MS13 which is—I think—El Salvador—I believe—but we're trying to address that. So far, we haven't experienced a degree of problem because we've been proactive. We have not really had any notorious inmates from the standpoint that—we've had—now I have been in place where there have been—I've dealt with—had to deal with notorious inmates, but we haven't really had anybody here that would fall in that category.

[00:39:46]

Frederiksen: Let's see your personal history [unclear], you know, whether its from Pender or whatever, more of those urban areas, you know, so a reader could kind of get a sense of your mission here within the county and how you relate to these [unclear].

[00:39:59]

Bell: Nothing comes to mind, there's not that many from Pender County here. There's not that many. Most of them, like I said, are from the more urban areas. We've seen quite a few out of Jacksonville, quite a few out of Wilmington. But not many out of Pender. You can go to our website, and it will actually give you a breakdown of where inmates in the system where they were convicted. Of course, what you gonna see is that the large urban counties are gonna have a much, much higher percentage. At some point, we can maybe take a break and I can pull that data up, but I don't know of any—there has been a few cases of inmates who were from Pender County, that got assigned to Pender County, that we started receiving community opposition to them being here.

[00:41:06]

Frederiksen: Yeah, tell me about that.

[00:41:08]

Bell: Well, we had one case—and I don't—like I said, I don't want—but it was a sexual offense, and the victim lived nearby and still felt a sense of fear. We are—we have really taken an emphasis in recent years on victim rights. There's a registry now that a victim of a crime can register with us, and if there's any significant changes in that inmate status—for example, if he were to escape, there would be a immediate notification made to that victim. That inmate so in so has escaped from so in so. But we have a call up—opposing that inmate being here. We want to be sensitive to that, and so we made the decision that, because of the nature of the crime, the obvious concern from the community and from the victim and her family, about this inmate being that close by. Even though we've got real good security, we felt it prudent that, that inmate be moved. The inmate didn't like it, inmates family didn't like it, but we felt like that was the appropriate thing to do. Inmate has no inherent right to be housed at any particular institution, now ideally, you would want that inmate to be close to that family support as it can, as you can.

But because of various concern, if we think the inmate may be an escape risk—we have a pretty elaborate classification system that relies on what we call points, and we look at inmates past history, their violence, institutional violence, the nature of their crime, how many infractions and what type, their age, what percentage of their sentence that they pull, there's a whole lot of factors that are taking in consideration to assign inmate points. If he—if he can't—what we call case factoring, if he case factors into a certain range, then that's typically where the custody level he will be assigned to. We can do overrides, positive or negative, but typically, we stick to case factoring. If his background, his criminal history, the nature of his crime, his institutional behavior, his violence and all that is such, that he factors in that particular range we're gonna leave him in that custody level.

We have three basic custody levels, minimum, medium, and close. Close is analogous with maximum custody. Most of the prisons that are being built are close custody, because we're seeing inmates that are coming in that are habitual, in and out of prison, more violent, and more lengthy sentences. So our need is in the close custody [unclear] Of course now, where crowded—every—we have a difficult problem with overcrowding. And we're probably going to have a problem with overcrowding for years to come. The structure sentencing has done that to us and we're seeing a growth of somewhere around one thousand inmates a year in a system that already has about thirty five thousand. Large system, billion dollar budget. I mean we're big business, but we're going to

have to—either the legislature is going to have to make some adjustments in the law, or we're gonna have to build more prisons to keep up with this influx. But we've got a wide range of offenders over on that side of the fence, we've got the inmates that have committed the nonviolent crimes. That may be the habitual DWIs, the forgeries, which his a felony, some of those kind of nonviolent crimes, and we've got to run the whole gambit. Up to those that have committed multiple murders, rapes, armed robberies, we have a lot of sexual offenders. Large number of sexual offenders, large number of sexual offenders involving minors. That makes them what we call a hard custody risk, to those folks will spend a lot of time in medium custody or close custody.

We have a philosophy of not putting of not putting an inmate in minimum custody too soon. They're eligible to go from medium to minimum when they're within five years of some type of release, whether it be a parole, or just a maximum release. But our philosophy is that we don't want the inmates going to minimum custody, like the one in Wilmington or the one Kenansville, too soon. So our philosophy is to maintain them in medium custody until we feel like they are ready for minimum custody. Minimum custody has much lower security, there are no armed guards, armed officers on the parameters. A lot of them go out in the community, and work in community service projects. We have inmates that do litter pickup, work for municipalities, battleships, places like that throughout the Wilmington area. All those minimum custody units have the same sort of thing. We don't want that inmate out there too soon. One, he may not be ready. He may get the minimum custody and think, oh man, I got another four years before I can get out of here. So, you know, we try to be sensitive so that we don't promote the inmate too soon.

Our escape rate in prisons has gone from—back in the seventies, when I first came into the system and even into the eighties, we were seeing literally thousands of escapes every year in North Carolina. I mean—it was—it was—unreasonable. Part of the reason was our classification system was not strong. Our staffing patterns were much less, the supervision—the number of officers that we have on our allocation staff to supervise was much less. Now it's much better. We have many more—our staff inmate ratio is much better than it was then. Now we're in an area where we're seeing dozens of escapes statewide in a year, as compared to thousands. So, this prison, I could not even tell you when the last escape was. There has not been an escape in many, many years from this prison. The last one was inmate coming back from court, under the supervision of a deputy sheriff. They pulled up to that stop sign out there—the deputy had known the prisoner for years. He had him in the front seat, only with a pair of handcuffs, and then inmate got to that stop sign, looked over here at this prison and said "I ain't going back."

He reached over and took the deputy's pistol away from him. Told the deputy to drive. The deputy put the car in the ditch, the inmate pointed the gun at him, pulled the trigger, but it was on safe. The deputy jumped out—rolled out of the vehicle, the inmate got out of the driver's seat and drove down Penderlea to escape. Had the deputies coat, and hat, and his weapon, and his car. He had gotten—he somehow gotten one hand out of one side of the cuffs. We searched him all night long, it was a cold January night a few years ago.

[00:49:51]

Frederiksen: And this is while you were here, sir?

[00:49:54]

Bell: Oh yeah, well I had gone home but—

[00:49:56]

Frederiksen: On the job—obvious on the law enforcement side, not the correctional side.

[00:50:00]

Bell: No, he has not—

[00:50:01]

Frederiksen: This was prisoner transfer—

[00:50:03]

Bell: He was coming back—he had gone to Carteret County and had gotten an additional sentence, weren't but a couple of years add-on. That was a scary night. Of course once he escaped, we went into full mobilization. They called me, I immediately came back. We notified highway patrol, Pender County Sheriff's Department, Burgaw Police Department—we started our process of trying to figure out where did this guy go. Of course, he was in this deputy's car, that's a marked car. We sent, of course, the Highway Patrol sent out a [unclear], that this guy stolen his car, be on the lookout. [Be on what we called bolo?]. So that led us to the conclusion that instead of trying to get away at a high rate speed, and put as much distance between us and him. He has—he's hiding—he's held up somewhere.

[00:51:05]

Frederiksen: [unclear] and what year was this [unclear]?

[00:51:09]

Bell: I would have to research—

[00:51:10]

Frederiksen: I'm just curious. Yeah, this is excellent. You talked about a cold January night, what was it like to be? [I saw your face?].

[00:51:17]

Bell: Well, when I got that come at home—of course, I had just got home. It occurred—it was after dark, or right near dark. I had just—I don't think I had—I just gotten home when I got the call, of course, I immediately turned around and came back. In the meantime, of course, we have mobilized our staff. We have what's known as a PERT team, Prison Emergency Response Team. These folks have special training for prison emergencies. Of course, this would fall in the category of emergency. You got an armed felon who's stolen—that—he pulled the trigger and would have tried to kill the deputy, and had his car, had his gun, and he's on the loose and all. Well, you know, kind of scary you know. Anyway, we were searching for back roads, all the way down between here and Penderlea. Back this road in front of us goes all the way down to the community of Penderlea, down the road. We're searching the back roads, we're—you know, we've got all of our staff available staff, we've called our PERT team. We're out there, of course, law enforcement is assisting us. We have cooperative agreement for law enforcement, mutual aid, if we need them or if they need us, we're gonna help each other out. Because we are part of that law enforcement community. Anyway, we searched for that guy—well we found—we got some intelligence that

this inmate had a friend who lived in Castle Hayne. So, we made contact with that friend, and said, “have you heard from so-in-so,” and he said “well, I guarantee that if he’s escaped, he’s going to contact me.” And we got him to agree that, you know, that he would let us know. But we staked out that neighborhood. As it turns out the inmate—we found out the next morning, the inmate had gone several miles down this road and had put up that police car way back up in a wooded path. Back up in the woods, and he basically just there waiting. He said he saw us all around, putting our spotlights into the woods. Of course, if we had something like a helicopter with infrared on or something, you know, we could have found him. But anyway, we had that neighborhood staked out and somewhere around three or four o’clock in the morning—surprisingly, the inmate tells us that he drove that marked car, he made his way out to I-40—three to four o’clock in the morning, and surprisingly, drove that marked car from here to Wilmington or here to Castle Hayne. I found that hard to believe, because I would have taken the back roads. But he swears he went down I-40.

Anyway, our staff down are down there near the gentlemen’s house, and here he comes walking down the street, wearing the deputy’s coat and carrying that nine-millimeter. We’re in a very close residential neighborhood, so my staff wisely made the decision not to fire, not to shoot, at because you know. Now I happened to be back here when the call came in that he had been spotted. Needless to say, we made it down there posthaste. We were there within a little while. We set up a parameter. The inmate went to the doors. We had already been there and talked to the gentlemen, his girlfriend and her two kids were in this house, went to the front door, knocked, he answered, and he wouldn’t let him in. He would not let him in. So, the inmate went around into the garage, and apparently entered the house through another door. Then entered the house from the garage. They retreated to the bedroom, locked themselves in the bedroom. Well, he made them open the door, got in their said “man you got to help me, they’re on my tail, you got to help me, you got to help me.” He said “man I can’t help you. I just can do this.”

[00:55:46]

Frederiksen: Meanwhile his girlfriend and the kids are in the bedroom.

[00:55:47]

Bell: They are in the bedroom too; they are all in the bedroom. He looks over and sees the guy’s car keys laying on the dresser. He grabs them, runs out the front—you see actually the truck—runs out the front door, jumps in the guy’s truck and takes off. Well, we’re behind him, chased him through this residential neighborhood. He comes to a cul de sac. He got nowhere to go. So, he takes off across backyards in his trucks. He hits a privacy fence behind one of those houses and disables the trucks. Jumps out of the truck, still carrying that nine-millimeter, and runs into a wooded area next to this pass. We still got perimeter maintained, so he’s not going anywhere. He’s in those woods somewhere. We were setting up spotlights around him.

[00:56:42]

Frederiksen: Sure, light’s camera action.

[00:56:47]

Bell: But I had a bad feeling, I really had a bad feeling. No, somebody’s going to get hurt, somebody’s going to get hurt.

[00:56:50]

Frederiksen: And that's something you get from your experience in law enforcement

[00:56:53]

Bell: Yeah, and there have been—I've worked in my career, I have probably worked a hundred and thirty, to a hundred and forty escapes. And this is one of those handfuls that I had a bad feeling about. I mean, the men still armed, and he's run, and it's night, and it's a wooded area. So, we made a decision that we would enter that area with members of our PERK team and a canine unit. We found him hiding in the ditch, he had discarded the pistol and gave up. So, it did have a happy ending after all, but it was one of those that didn't [?—you think about those armed escape—a person desperate enough to do something like that. With his arms and he's desperate, and we got him cornered. Bad feeling. But it turned out okay. Of course, he immediately was brought back. He was served with a whole slew of warrants.

When he pointed the gun at the deputy and attempted to pull the trigger, that's an attempted murder, stealing his car, breaking into the house—you know, a whole slew of charges. He was demoted into close custody, transferred to our central prison in Raleigh. I don't know if those cases have ever been resolved in courts, because not only did he have charges out of Pender County, but he also had charges out of New Hanover County. Two different jurisdictions. The thing about it is the inmate was not pulling a very long sentence. I think his original sentence was like seven years. So, it wasn't like he was pulling life sentence or a hundred years, he had a relatively short term. Sometimes inmates who have shorter sentences will give you more problems than inmates who have long sentences. Inmates who are pulling life sentences, particularly, if they pulled a fairly long period of time they have adjusted to the system. They've accepted their fate.